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ABSTRACT

A study explored downsizing from the perspective of the person separated from the job and its connection to violence and peace studies. Literature on downsizing, violence, peace studies, and organizational studies was reviewed. Participants were 28 white-collar employees, including the researcher, separated from the same organization. Data were derived from a demographic profile form, individual interviews, journaling and field notes, electronic communication among the colleagues in transition and the researcher. Findings indicated people experienced downsizing differently based on individual perspective and context; language used to describe gradations of violence can be positioned along a continuum between violence and peace, disorder and order, social injustice and social justice, barbarity and civility, according to the way in which the downsizing was perceived; experiences of downsizing described a gap between potential and actual realization of one or more basic human needs; stories of the downsizing suggest corroboration of personal, structural, and cultural violence to render it acceptable; most employees affected by the downsizing believed there was nothing they could do to alter the decision; few participants considered alternatives to downsizing by forced separation; and the common element of these participants' downsizing experience was separation. (16 references) (YLB)

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The Ambushed Spirit: Perspective, Violence and Downsizing

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Abstract: The purpose of this study was to investigate downsizing from the perspective of the person who was separated from the job, and to explore its connection to violence and peace studies. Findings suggest that experiences varied according to context and point of view and that downsizing was often a violative.

This study was born out of my own experience with downsizing. I was one of 1,100 white-collar employees in a large automotive manufacturing firm, separated from the job at the beginning of an industry downturn in August 2000. From my perspective, this downsizing was an act of violence just as real as other types of workplace violence. I approached this study with the following questions: From the perspective of the person separated from the job, how does he or she describe the experience of downsizing? What is the relationship between his or her downsizing and violence? And how is it that downsizing appears to have become so accepted? To frame this study, I consulted four main bodies of literature: downsizing, violence, peace studies, and organizational studies.

Review of the Literature

A review of the literature on downsizing resulted in a plethora of work viewing downsizing from different perspectives and grounded in disciplines including Human Resource Management (HRM), Human Resource Development, Labor and Industrial Relations, Business Ethics, Applied Social Psychology, Philosophy, Management Studies, Family Counseling, Career Development and Counseling, Economics and Finance, and Religious Studies. Subjects of this writing have been professionally, racially, ethnically, and otherwise diverse. Interest has focused on coping with downsizing and reemployment, particularly as the two intersect with other variables, i.e. health and demographic, for example. Most of the writing glosses over felt experiences, concentrating on how to downsize the "right" way. Writing about victims of downsizing has been descriptive, or analyzed from a clinical, psychoanalytical standpoint. While the employees' words provide the content for these analyses, there appears to be a separation between researcher and researched, subjects and objects, observer and observed, interviewer and interviewee. The literature stops short of in-depth exploration of differences in the way downsizing is experienced. None overtly connects downsizing with the discourse of violence and peace studies.

The literature on violence, except for a cursory remark by Stanage (1974), has not been explicitly conjoined with the experience of downsizing. For the most part, writers have been preoccupied with defining violence, situating it within the context of evil (Karake-Shalhoub, 1999), the Myth of Satan (Hallie, 1974 & Rubinoff, 1974), and even the Holocaust. It appears that what constitutes violence for one individual may not for another, depending on perspective (Stanage, 1974, 1981). Usually violence is portrayed as physical violence. Rarely is it analyzed holistically, affecting mind and body simultaneously. In the workplace, violence is presented as a risk management, legal, and HRM concern. When violence is coupled with downsizing, it generally refers to hurt and angry employees who seek revenge against those who terminated the

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relationship. It is possible to find some work on institutionalized violence although it tends to be mixed with discussions about violence as armed conflict (Arendt, 1970; Downs, 1995; Rubinoff, 1974; Stanage, 1974), domestic abuse, or philosophical investigations of evil, harm, force, authority, power, and strength (Arendt, 1970; Stanage, 1974). To my knowledge, this study is among the first to situate violence within the context of downsizing as perceived by those who were separated from the job—not as a response to downsizing, but in the practice of downsizing itself.

Pivotal to this study are Stanage's (1974) definition of violence "...as an 'out-of-order' act or event" and the Theory of Violatives. "These violatives are phenomenological distinctions within occurrences of violence—distinctions that are articulated by our language when this language is carefully explored..." (p. 208). The phenomenon of violence can be explored according to its instrumentality within a social context. Gradations of violence can be situated along a continuum between civility and barbarity, keeping in mind that violence can be constructive or destructive in outcome or intent. Stanage unveiled the Theory of Violatives in 1974. In 1981 he expanded it to include ways in which violative occurrences can dis-order the civil order as defined by a person's or social group's "proprietary relevancy structures." He called these unwelcome occurrences "thrusts", and names them distrusive, intrusive, obtrusive, retrusive, and subtrusive, i.e. DIORS (pp. 92-4).

Equally important to this study was the work of Johan Galtung, founder of the International Peace Research Institute in Oslo. In order to understand peace, Galtung claims (1969), it is imperative that one study violence, since violence is the absence of peace and peace the absence of violence. Violence refers to the gap between potential and actual satisfaction of one or more basic human needs, i.e. survival, well-being, identity and freedom. Phenomena that widen that gap constitute violence (Galtung, 1990). Originally, Galtung's typology of violence had six dimensions: personal/structural, direct/indirect, and physical/ psychological. In 1990, Galtung added a seventh, cultural violence. Cultural violence is comprised of institutions that make violence seem all right, or at minimum, not so bad. Examples of contributors to cultural violence include religion, ideology, language, formal science, law, and the media.

Institutional theory was particularly relevant to this exploration of downsizing. Institutional theory suggests that isomorphism is a major characteristic of organizational behavior and definition, resulting in organizations becoming increasingly similar to each other, adopting homogeneous norms of behavior and structure. Di Maggio and Powell describe three types of isomorphism: coercive, mimetic, and normative, i.e. when organizations impose specific structures or rules for behavior, when organizations mimic each other's strategies, usually in response to the nebulous or unknown, and when organizations adopt or accept structures or strategies because powerful actors become their proponents (Di Maggio and Powell, 1983, cited in http://www.stanford.edu/~krollag/org_site/encyclop/instit/brdg/stgy.html).

Method

I designed a qualitative investigation to address my research questions. Twenty-eight white-collar employees participated in this study, including myself. We were separated from the same organization, within the August 2000 timeframe, and represented seven company locations in the metropolitan area. Recruitment occurred through activities sponsored by the outplacement consulting firm, contracted by the organization to assist separated employees during the transition. Outplacement staff guarded identity and numbers of people who were downsized; however, I was able to generate a networking list, which included approximately 67 employees.

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All were invited to participate in this study; 28 elected to do so. Candidates were limited to this metropolitan area because of ease in arranging meetings, and to minimize potential impact of dissimilar job markets on individual experiences. Data were derived from a demographic profile form that I devised, one-on-one in-depth interviews (tape recorded and transcribed verbatim), my own journaling and field notes, a segment of one participant's journal, electronic communication between the colleagues in transition and myself, the company's annual report and investor message boards. Collection and analysis were influenced by grounded theory, phenomenology, and hermeneutics. As I read the texts, I noted the use of figurative linguistic expressions, transitive sentence constructions, and verb forms that were suggestive of violence. I listed those words and expressions per participant, turning them into violative (verb + -ive) forms to extend Stanage's Theory of Violatives (1974) within the context of this corporate downsizing. Through a heightened awareness of language, I was able to extract the participants' perceptions of "modes and themes of violence" (Stanage, 1969, 1974, 1981).

Findings

It soon became apparent that in order for the participants to tell their stories, they needed to contextualize them within their life stories and employment relationship. A temporal downsizing horizon emerged including Before, During, and After for everyone, and an Interim for some. Three different reactions to the downsizing emerged: "Layoff was a godsend to me" (Dale), "It happened: move on" (Peter), and "We were hurt" (Patrick). People with the first two reactions would have preferred to stay until they decided to leave "if they had their druthers" (Bob). Those for whom the layoff was a godsend described their most recent job as difficult, so much so that they suffered psychosomatic symptoms that would be resolved only upon severing the relationship. They saw no choice but to leave the company, had they not been downsized. Of the 28 participants in this study, approximately 20 perceived their experiences as hurtful.

Participants referred to their experience using language including downsized, laid off, axed, severed, cut, and separated. Regardless of which word was selected, a common connotation of each was that a union had been divided or dissolved, that something had changed, that order had been dis-ordered or that dis-order had been re-ordered, and a connection had been dis-connected, i.e. separated. These expressions demonstrated transitive grammatical structures, suggesting that subjects, known or unknown, had acted upon objects. In this case, the "objects" were once employees. Issues of power, control, freedom, and agency are located in this concept. The stories of these 28 participants suggest that they were welcomely or unwelcomely separated from relationships, belonging, identity, this job, daily structure, career trajectory, and security. For Dale and Alexandra, however, the downsizing was preferable to the toxicity of the jobs. For all, perceptions of the downsizing experience appeared to be dependent upon personal perspectives and individual work and life contexts.

Stanage (1969, 1987) refers to linguistic phenomenology as a heightened awareness of the language used by persons to reveal themselves to others. I noted the language used by the participants to tell their stories. The language tended to be vivid, filled with transitive constructions, figurative expressions consisting of similes and metaphors, and words commonly understood in U.S. culture as connotative of violence. These linguistic constructions betrayed the separation, suddenness, abruptness, unexpectedness, unwelcomeness, and the physical and psychological pain of this experience. At times, the language suggested a disparity of power, coercion, finality, reification, and deception. Some participants spoke of assaults on their identities, using words such as humiliated, embarrassed, and insulted. Others mentioned words

of alienation, such as excluded, shunned, I was left out of, I felt alone, and I am no longer a part of. Some used this language deliberately and selectively, while others reported being less conscious of how or why they had chosen these words. Some used words that they had heard others speak in similar situations; others transferred words from the vernacular of a large city's neighborhood in which they had grown up, their interest in competitive sports, from history, particularly military history, or from movies like "Braveheart". All appeared to reach for words outside of the whitewashed vocabulary of downsizing, re-engineering, restructuring, delayering, rightsizing, reorganizing, and other examples of corporate speak. No one used the word peace; no one used the word violence (as I had expected), even though the language used and the experiences described suggested gradations of violence.

Long-term employees reported that they had witnessed approximately seven downsizings in this organization since 1975. Most participants believed that the decision makers knew that the downsizing would negatively impact their lives, and that they did not care. How was it then that the organization downsized anyway? Few problematized the decision to downsize, some defended it—even after describing personal experiences ranging from unpleasant to painful. This reaction was contrary to my expectations, since I was certain they would view downsizing more critically as a result of their experiences. I suggest that a possible interpretation of the acceptability phenomenon is the cultural violence of which Galtung speaks, that makes the downsizing seem all right, or certainly not so bad (1990). Cultural institutions, such as Law (articles of incorporation, Employment at will), Ideology (capitalism, the supremacy of the shareholder), Religion (rooted in dualities, the relationship between wealth and chosenness), Formal Science (financial reports and benchmarking), Language (The corporation as active subject, headcount, they had to do it, business/personal), and the Media (commonplace through routine reporting) make personal and structural violence possible and advance legitimation. Some individuals volunteered alternatives to downsizing on their own, while others considered them only on probing. Most had not thought about ways to downsize costs without separating people from the job.

Findings from this study were consistent with Stanage's Theory of Violatives and definition of violence. Stanage (1974) defines violence as the dis-order of order. Order is constructed by an individual or a group of individuals according to what he, she, or they consider to be important. Stanage envisages a continuum spanning between order and dis-order, or civility and barbarity. He holds that it is possible to identify gradations of violence by positioning commonly understood verbs in the English language along this continuum, according to their connotation. In developing the Theory of Violatives, Stanage selected a list of verbs from the Oxford English Dictionary (OED), and added the –ive ending transforming them into nouns and suggesting that certain phenomena had the qualities of or tendencies toward whatever the verb meant. Examples of violatives that he selected include abusives, breakives, woundives, harmives, injurives and so on (1974, p. 230). Stanage (1969) challenged his readers to develop the theory by situating other violative phenomena within it. I have responded by situating this downsizing within the Theory of Violatives, expanding the vocabulary with words used by participants in this study. It is possible to position the participants' experiences of downsizing along Stanage's continuum, using words and concepts they have selected. One can now say, for example, that for some people downsizing was a shun-ive, cut-ive, rip-ive, flunk-ive, whack-ive, devastate-ive, crush-ive, concern-ive, worry-ive, devalue-ive, disrespect-ive, and so on. It is also possible to say that if one's experience of downsizing makes it a betray-ive or disappoint-ive, it could also be a distrusive; if a strain-ive, obtrusive; and if a cut-ive, intrusive.

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Galtung (1969) defines violence as an unwelcome gap between potential and actual satisfaction of four basic human needs: survival, well-being, identity, and freedom. Interestingly, if one accepts that the realization of human needs constitutes order and civility, then peace and social justice could be used to name the same end of the continuum as Stanage's civility and order--likewise for the absence of these and the opposite end of the continuum, i.e. violence, social injustice, dis-order, and barbarity. If the violative phenomenon suggests a subject-verb-object construction, where the subject is readily identifiable, it constitutes personal or direct violence. If the subject is vague and diffuse, the phenomenon constitutes structural violence. In this study, participants sometimes referred to their boss or boss' boss as the person who selected them for downsizing, resulting from a personal or professional vendetta. Survivors called this a "political assassination". Other times, participants alluded to "they" or "the organization" when attributing perceived accountability for their downsizing, perhaps referring to indirect or structural violence rather than personal or direct. This study suggests that an internal bureaucratic and political culture of "compliance and regimentation" (Patrick) coupled with external competitive pressures made it possible for this downsizing to occur.

Findings from this study were consistent with the tenets of institutional theory. Participants recounted the history of a company that had been in existence for over a century and that managed to survive near bankruptcy in the 1980s. In this cyclical industry, organizational leaders from this firm, like those representing major competitors, responded to each downturn by downsizing in this way, i.e. forcibly separating employees from the job. Participants held that was the way they have always done it. This is consistent in part with isomorphic behavior, i.e. mimetic, normative and coercive.

Conclusions and Implications for Adult Education

Findings from this study point to the following conclusions: people experienced their downsizing differently based on individual perspective and context; language used to describe gradations of violence can be positioned along a continuum between violence and peace, dis-order and order, social injustice and social justice, barbarity and civility, according to the way in which the downsizing was perceived; experiences of downsizing describe a gap between potential and actual realization of one or more basic human needs; stories of the downsizing suggest corroboration of personal, structural and cultural violence to render it acceptable; most employees affected by the downsizing believed there was nothing they could do to alter the decision; few participants considered alternatives to downsizing by forced separation; and the common element of these participants' downsizing experience was separation.

Implications of this study for adult educators interested in promoting peace in the work place include: taking an active interest in monitoring policy that grants unproblematized power to some stakeholders over others; researching and exposing the violative potential of some executive decisions, and assisting decision makers to seek alternative solutions; helping workers to understand that united voices and action against work place violence might wield sufficient power to resist and affect positive change; preparing management scholars within academe by developing a curriculum that includes a critique of corporate practices and contemporary issues as well as their impact on other people; and problematizing what it is they are being asked to do, by whom, to what end, for whose benefit, to whose exclusion/inclusion, why, and then looking inside themselves to see how consistent that is with their beliefs about persons in the work place.

While this study raises the Adult Educator's consciousness of the violative potential of downsizing, the following research agenda might be influential in abolishing it altogether: What

is the impact of repeated downsizing on learning and knowledge management in the workplace? What is the importance of commitment and relationships within the workplace as demonstrated in bottom line results? What must be done in order to enact policy, insuring portability of benefits? And What are successful alternatives to downsizing without resorting to forced separations?

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